Parallax

Photography and The Gaze: The Ethics of Vision Inverted

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It can not be denied that our age is the epoch of the photograph: we are surrounded by photographic images in our living rooms, in the streets, in our places of work and in our places of leisure. And yet, the photographic image was generally ignored by most major twentieth century philosophers working in phenomenology. Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Lacan and Levinas all choose examples of paintings rather than photographs to illustrate, and/or ground, their arguments on issues of visual perception, aesthetic, ethics and politics. It is surprising and disturbing that despite the fact that these philosophers were all exposed to an ever increasing number of disturbing and difficult photographic images, often raising philosophical issues relevant to their own work, they chose to ignore discussions of such photographs in their philosophical work.

In what follows I would like to try and tease out the possibility of showing how a strategic reading of Lacan and Levinas's accounts of the visual could be connected to a reading of their respective accounts of ethics, in an attempt to arrive at a possible approach that would allow us to read photographs through their respective accounts, even if neither offered an explicit account that would allow us to do so. Lacan and Levinas were contemporaries who worked in very different contexts. The former, psychoanalysis with clinical focus, the latter, philosophy with transcendental/theistic aspects. And yet their work shared much in common. Partly because of the very different contexts in which they both worked until recently the similarities between their work was not fully acknowledged. My reasons for choosing strategic readings of Lacan and Levinas is because only through strategic readings is it possible to tease out relevant and urgent philosophical arguments for us today, and in particular for my purpose of connecting philosophy to photography.

One possible explanation I could offer for the above philosophical silence on photography is that the visual examples in the form of paintings discussed by the above philosophers are all very well known: already accepted as works of art and as such, already occupy a particular cultural status which require no further justifications. At the time, photographs rarely, if at all, occupied such status. Works of art are understood to be valued for their culturally-accepted artistic merit, and artistic merit is understood in terms of innovation, be it formal or other. In modernity at least, works of art were certainly not valued for their capacity to represent 'reality', whatever this 'reality' might be. Since few, if any, photographs before the 1960s were accepted on their innovative artistic merit as works of art, photographs were generally interpreted and judged not so much on their potential moment of innovation (art) but their capacity at 'representation'.

The photographic medium was distinguished from painting on the basis of its process and materials. Photography involves a process whereby the materiality of the event leaves material trace (light and its effects) and as such a claim for actual material connection between the printed trace, the photograph and the event. For the medium utilizes actual light that leaves an actual trace on a light sensitive sensor (traditionally film, now often digital) from which prints could be printed.

Moreover, the medium is capable of producing recognizable images – since the camera mirrors the structure of our own eyes, even to the extent that the image appears reversed on the retina, to be reversed again by the brain (mirror in the camera) – of everyday life. As such, the medium of photography raises additional philosophical problems relating the status of the process, the material traces, their relationship to reality as representation and the fact that the images are generally easily recognizable as images of our everyday life, which the above philosophers did not feel ready, or willing, to engage with.

Thus, for example, Lacan's account of the scopic drive in his 1964 seminar *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, mentions and even discusses paintings by Holbein, Matisse, Goya, Durer, Arcimboldo, Dali, Munch, Ensor, Masson, Picasso, Zeuxis, Caravaggio and others, but does not mention any photographic examples, despite the fact that he discusses optics and perspective at some length. Photography is mentioned by Lacan in order to illustrate metaphorically what he seeks to present as a proto-mechanical/natural process: the gaze, Lacan says, 'is the instrument through which […] I am photo-graphed.'[1]

The philosophical silence on photography throughout much of the twentieth century had the implication that philosophy ignored an important and increasingly influential aspect of our everyday encounters with images, often images that seek to comment on urgent social, political and ethical issues as well as aesthetic problems, all of which were central philosophical issues the above philosophers were engaged with.

Part of the problem philosophers would have encountered in any attempt to engage with photography and its medium which insists on material connection with the event photographed, is the philosophical suspicion of the visual. Since Plato at least, the philosophical tradition was suspicious of the seductive power of the visual and its use as a cognitive tool. Whilst Plato calls vision 'humanity's greatest gift',[2] he also warns against its necessary illusion when seen by our imperfect two eyes. Famously in the *Republic*, the artist is banished from the ideal state on the grounds that art offers representations that hold fascination and a seductive lure but ultimately the visual is but mere illusion, not Truth as such.

However, Plato's account of vision is more complex than it might appear at first sight. In the *Timaeus* Plato explains that whilst vision is 'humanity's greatest gift', this gift was given to us so that

> […] we should see the revolutions of intelligence in the heavens and use
> their untroubled course to guide the troubled revolutions in our own
> understanding, which are akin to them, and so, by learning what they

are and how to calculate them accurately according to their nature, correct the disorder of our own revolutions by the standard of the invariability of those of God.[3]

For Plato, the 'gift of vision' is but a stage towards ethics, just as embodied love (sexual love) is but a stage to the higher love (intellectual love), to knowledge, to the love of Truth as such (the focus of his *Symposium*). Plato celebrates the gift of vision, however, it is not the vision seen by our two eyes but the vision of our inner eye, our mind's eye and the philosopher's eye. It is vision's capacity to see 'the Good' which should guide us in our imperfect world. It is easy to miss the crucial point here, yes Plato celebrates the vision of our mind's eye, but for Plato this is made possible for us only through the imperfect vision of our two eyes. At the same time, vision is awarded the task of being able 'to see' the Good, in short, vision is our path to ethics.

Whitehead once said that the history of philosophy is but a footnote to Plato. On one level it is, for example, possible to see Kant's account of the beautiful and the sublime in his *Critique of Justice* whereby he attempts to connect knowledge and morality through the aesthetic (predominantly visual in Kant), as a development of Plato's above articulation of vision. Though the history of philosophy can also be read as a critique of Plato, there are many threads of Platonic thought that can become visible even in the work of his strongest critics; Lacan, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre and Levinas could be seen as examples.

Lacan's early account of vision in his 1949 essay 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function' is that the mirrored image – later to become articulated as the Imaginary – is but a 'a specular image', an 'imago', not unlike that encountered in hallucinations and dreams, it is an illusion. And yet, like Plato, Lacan does not dismiss the illusory visual, the Imaginary. For Lacan, vision (the Imaginary) holds a seductive fascination, the image lures us and entices us, but it offers only an illusion, albeit a seductive illusion of wholeness, autonomy and similarity: it is but 'the *méconnaissances* that constitute the ego, the illusion of autonomy to which it entrusts itself. This flight of fancy.'[4] For Lacan however, this lure of fascination is at the same time also a symptom of an underlying structure and it allows him, in his later works, to develop his account of alienation and otherness necessary for his account of ethics.

A year earlier, in 1948, Levinas published his essay 'Reality and its Shadow' in the Sartrean *Les Temps Modernes*. Though the essay provoked a preface from the editorial board, it actually shares much with Sartre's account in *L'Imaginaire* as well as Lacan and Plato's, they all reveal a deep mistrust in the lure of the image, which produces only a degraded form of knowledge. Like Lacan, Levinas offers an account whereby the image 'marks a hold over us.'[5] Though there are fundamental differences between the two accounts – they were written and presented for fundamentally very different contexts, audiences and purposes – there are also basic similarities in their suspicion of the image and yet in its capacity to operate as 'otherness', as Levinas puts it 'Being is not only itself, it escapes itself', 'it is what it is and it is a stranger to itself',[6] Levinas is keen to show how his account is nothing other than Platonic development, hence he compares it to Plato's comment in the *Phaedo*, saying: 'there is a simultaneity of a being

and its reflection'; 'non-truth is not an obscure residue of being, but its sensible character itself.'[7]

In Plato the distinction is between the intelligible and the sensible which Levinas is careful not to adopt. However, whether this Platonic distinction still maintains its transcendental nature in Levinas remains problematic especially since he explicitly articulates it in terms of human and God/deity, which can easily collapse back into sensible and intelligible respectively. What interests me here is that Levinas is utilizing this distinction to create 'otherness', not unlike Lacan's above account.

Like Levinas, Lacan is also keen to show the Platonic connection to his account of vision, though unlike Levinas he is careful to distinguish his account from the transcendental aspect of the Platonic account: the other, he insists, is not '[…] eidos of beauty and good, a supreme truth, coming to us from beyond. It is something that comes to us from the structural necessities, something humble, born at the level of the lowest encounters […].'[8] In his 1964 seminar, Lacan praises Merleau-Ponty's unfinished work *The Visible and the Invisible* and connects it to Plato and the philosophical tradition in general.

Lacan insists that Merleau-Ponty's focus on vision indicates for us

> the moment of the arrival of the philosophical tradition – the tradition that begins with Plato with the promulgation of the idea, of which one may say that, setting out from an aesthetic world, it is determined by an end given to being as sovereign good, thus attaining a beauty that is also its limit. And it is not by chance that Maurice Merleau-Ponty recognized its guide in the eye.[9]

Lacan interprets Merleau-Ponty's account in line with Plato's account in the *Timaeus* to the extent that the eye – vision – offers a progression towards the good, ethics. And yet, Lacan himself does not explicitly develop his account of the eye, of the visual, so that it leads to ethics, though he hints at it more than once.

In his 1959–60s seminar *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* Lacan explains that ethics begins 'at the moment when the subject poses the question of that good he had unconsciously sought in the social structure.'[10] Moreover, he argues that the good (happiness) is expressed in politics since 'there is no satisfaction for the individual outside the satisfaction of all.'[11] Ethics, for Lacan, is always within social and political context. Lacan connects ethics with Freud's account of sublimation but his example is not of a visual work but a written text: a tragedy – Sophocles' *Antigone* – albeit a text which is a theatrical work capable of performance, and thus capable also of appearing and being experienced visually as well as aurally, through smell and possibly touch and taste.

Like Lacan, for Levinas ethics involves words not images, his above early essay on art concludes by saying: 'one would have to introduce the perspective of the relation with the other without which being could not be told in its reality, that is, its time.'[12] Images, for Levinas, provide otherness but not the 'the other'; ethics for Levinas, like Lacan, requires the otherness of another human and as such is within social and political

contexts. And yet, both Levinas's and Lacan's accounts can be shown to lead from the visual to the ethical, sharing much of the central core of their respective understanding of ethics and the visual.

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In his essay 'Reality and its Shadow' Levinas is critical of aspects of the dominant approach to art at the time. Art, he insists, against Heidegger and others, 'does not belong to the order of revelation. Nor does it belong to that of creation.'[13] Levinas's critique of Heidegger's approach to art and his insistence on other phenomenological approaches to images instead is a helpful start in our attempt to include photographic images in the philosophical discourse. The phenomenological approach claims to offer an account based on my encounter with images, not an interpretation that relies on existing artistic status as works of art. Hence, the phenomenological approach can be applied to any image including photography, be it an art work or not.

Levinas, like Lacan, follows Husserl's phenomenological approach but applies it to images as opposed to actual objects in the world – which Husserl presents as mental images (having bracketed the world) – and argues that

> The phenomenology of images insists on their transparency. The intention of one who contemplates an image is said to go directly through the image, as through a window, into the world it represent, and aims at an *object*.[14]

Levinas, unlike Husserl, does not bracket the world, hence his point is that the image (visual or acoustic) is an image, not the world, thus what we see is precisely absence in the world, for the object is mere image, not object. He thus goes on to argue that 'a represented object, by the simple fact of becoming an image, is converted into a non-object', hence 'an image is a shadow of being, it is on 'the hither side.' Art, Levinas argues, is 'the very event of obscuring, a decent of the night, an invasion of the shadow.'[15] It offers no knowledge of the world, it is the shadow of the world. Art offers another world, the world of shadows and the night, a world analogous to his earlier account of the *Il y a* (there is) and here he calls it 'the Meanwhile'.

Levinas is referring to the world of images as 'the Meanwhile' because he argues that 'every image is in the last analysis […] a statue – a stoppage of time.'[16] For every image 'endures without a future', endlessly: 'eternally *Laocoon* will be caught up in the grip of serpents; the *Mona Lisa* will smile eternally.'[17] For Levinas, 'parallel with the duration of the living ran the eternal duration of the interval – the Meanwhile.'[18] Levinas's examples of images are works of art (painting, sculpture, music, novels, theatre), not photography. Had Levinas offered photographic examples would the examples force a slightly different account if attention were paid to the trace left by light? Conversely, might Levinas's account help us interpret photography differently?

Perhaps the most famous theoretical account – opening with a quasi-phenomenological account of photography – is Roland Barthes's 1980s book *Camera Lucida*. It

opens with what Barthes admits is his vague attempt to read photography phenomenologically. Like Levinas's presentation of Husserl, Barthes admits he was unable to distinguish the photograph from its referent, the photograph was but mere window, 'it is as if the photograph always carries its referent with itself', 'glued together', like 'the condemned man and its corpse in certain tortures.'[19] Though we are offered no references to Levinas, the similarity between Levinas's 'Meanwhile' and Barthes's account is unmistakeable. Moreover, Barthes says that in his vague phenomenological account what he found was that what the photograph 'reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially.'[20] However, he goes on to say, 'in the photograph, the event is never transcended.'[21] Levinas suggested that every image is a stoppage of time, Barthes argues that every photograph 'is the return of the dead', and that death is probably the 'essence of photography.'[22]

However, whilst Levinas concludes his account of the image in 'Reality and its Shadow' with the claim that through words and discourse, through criticism, the inhumanity of the image can be integrated into the human world, Barthes is exploring the image (the photographic image) a step further. Barthes uses Sartre's comment suggesting:

> Newspaper photographs can very well 'say nothing to me'. In other words, I look at them without assuming a posture of existence. […] Moreover, cases occur where the photograph leaves me so indifferent that I do not even bother to see it 'as an image'. The photograph is vaguely constituted as an object, and the persons who figure there are certainly constituted as persons, but only because of their resemblance to human beings, without any special intentionality.[23]

For Barthes, it is not only through words that the otherness of the images ('inhumanity' for Levinas) can be connected to the human, but the image itself, in its singularity and its lifelessness, has a power over me. The image can 'pierce me' like an arrow. One example Barthes offers is:

> One day, quite some time ago, I happened on a photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother, Jerome, taken in 1852. And I realized then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: 'I am looking at the eyes that looked at the Emperor'.[24]

This disruption through the visual image, Barthes famously calls *punctum*, meaning 'little hole', cut, sting but also encompassing the meaning of accident and surprise, cast of the dice; terms also used by Lacan to describe the gaze. The *punctum* is presented as an individual approach opposed to the *studium* which is an informed cultural approach of decoding and interpretation, the approach we are all familiar with through art history and cultural studies, an approach based on study and information, the academic approach to photography.

Levinas, whose phenomenological work aims ultimately at ethics – ethics as first philosophy – left his early discussion of the (inhuman) image in need of words to return

it to the world of (human) ethics. Barthes seeks to show how the image itself can offer an immediate and unexpected experience not only through discourse and words, but before discourse, before any information and interpretations have taken place and exchanged through words: it is the immediacy of the unexpected experience itself when confronted with a photograph, not just the otherness of the other person.

For phenomenology, Barthes says, the image is 'an object-as-nothing'[25] (absent object). However in photography, he argues, something else can be experienced phenomenologically:

> in the photograph, what I posit is not only absence of the object; it is also, by one and the same movement, on equal terms, the fact that this object has indeed existed and that it has been there where I see it. Here is where the madness is, for until this day no representation could assure me of the past of a thing except by intermediaries; but with the Photograph, my certainty is immediate: no one in the world can undeceive me.[26]

Barthes's emphasis is on that aspect in the photographic process that implies some level of contact between light captured by the sensor/film and printed image (even in today's digital age) that as individuals might strike us at specific moments. However, Barthes is nevertheless aware that his account works only on the level of singularity of moment, singularity of photograph and singularity of viewer, it is the singularity of the event that allows the *punctum* to occur unexpectedly and by accident. Once generalized, he says, photography raises a moral question, for 'it de-realizes the human world of conflicts and desires, under cover of illustrating it.'[27] Hence, for Barthes the photograph becomes 'a bizarre medium', it is a form of hallucination: it may be 'false on the level of perception' but it 'is true on the level of time.'[28]

Whilst Barthes's account offers some level of engagement with photography beyond mere illusion, photography remains on the level of hallucination and dream. More recently, in his essay entitled 'Judgement Day', Giorgio Agamben offers an approach to the interpretation of photographic works which might benefit from comparison with Levinas and Barthes's above accounts and allow us to move a step further.

Agamben, like Barthes, opens up with an individual approach. He starts by asking, not unlike Barthes: 'What quality fascinates and entrances me in the photographs I love?'. He then tells us: 'for me, photography in some way captures the last judgement: it represents the world as it appears on the last day, the Day of Wrath.'[29] Agamben clarifies his comment and explains that he is not referring to the photographs' subject matter; he does not mean that the photograph offers an illustration of events of 'judgement day'. Photography captures the last judgement because it is taken at a specific time of a specific event and shown at another. Whilst for Levinas the image remains in the 'Meanwhile', eternally frozen, Agamben's discussion of photography allows him to see a point of contact between image and time. On one level, Agamben is repeating Barthes comment that the photograph may be 'false on the level of perception' but 'true on the level of time.'

However, while Barthes did not go beyond the claim that the latter moment, the moment of truth (in terms of time) was probably limited to the singularity of the event in which it was viewed, Agamben wants to make a more general point which can be generalized. The 'day of judgement' is not only something I might experience at a particular time and place with a particular photograph, it is an experience which could be generalized to most photographs on most occasions to most viewers.

In calling that very moment 'judgement day' Agamben's reference is probably to Benjamin's essay 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'. In that essay Benjamin suggests that 'a chronicler who recites events' where 'nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history', each moment becomes 'Judgement Day', the chronicle Agamben is interpreting as photography. For photography does precisely that: it 'recites events', it offers frozen images of past moments.

Benjamin is interested in the instant which is always in danger of being forgotten by us as individuals and community. For Benjamin, 'the true picture of the past flits by' and 'every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.'[30] According to Benjamin, history is the history of the rulers who emerge as victors:

> Whoever has emerged as victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures.[31]

Thus, the movement of history and the establishment of what he calls cultural treasures (physical or mental) cannot be surveyed without horror. For cultural treasures

> owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.[32]

Moreover, for Benjamin, the transmission of cultural treasures (through education, museums, archives, media, academic discourse) are also the triumph of the rulers and as such not free of barbarism. Benjamin thus argues that our task is to 'brush history against the grain', so that we do not allow such moments to fall into oblivion. In this essay Benjamin does not mention photography, but the account of the chronicle may well be that of photography.

For Agamben, the good photographer 'knows how to grasp the eschatological nature of the gesture – without, however, taking anything away from historicity or singularity of the photographed event.'[33] The photograph offers 'the infinite recapitulation of an existence.'[34] However, whilst for Levinas this was an inhuman moment, for Agamben, following Benjamin, it is precisely the human moment that allows some form of commemoration. The distance between Levinas's image and Agamben is based on the assumption that the photograph captures a moment, however loosely we interpret this 'capture'. Whereas Levinas insists that the image belongs to the realm of hallucination

and the night, for Agamben, like Barthes, all 'photographs contain an unmistakable historical index, an indelible date'; however, Agamben insists they also refer to another time, more actual and urgent than any chronological time.[35] This is precisely what Benjamin meant when he said we must brush history against the grain.

Like Barthes, Agamben illustrates his argument with specific photographs. The central example he offers is the 1839 daguerreotype by Louis-Jacques-Mande Daguerre of *Boulevard du Temple*.[36] According to Agamben it is considered the first photograph in which a human figure appears. The photograph was taken from a balcony in midday at a busy moment when the Boulevard was probably crowded with people and carriages. And yet, because of the long exposure necessary by the camera used at the time, the moving mass of people is not visible, only a single man who stopped to have his shoe shined, Agamben insists, is visible. According to Agamben the photograph is of 'the crowd of humans – indeed, all of humanity – is present, but it cannot be seen, because the judgement concerns a single person, a single life: precisely this one and no other.'[37] Agamben interprets the photograph as a chronicle of unseen humanity which focuses on a singularity captured (not intentionally, but accidentally). Hence, he claims: 'I could have never invented a more adequate image of the Last Judgement.'[38]

In view of Benjamin's explicit reference, I wonder why Agamben insists on the single figure: the one who stopped to have his shoes shined? Surely, the photograph is also a chronicle of the one who shines shoes. Yet, Agamben insists that the one who stopped to have his shoes shined is captured in the photograph, ignoring the one shining shoes as a daily job. Agamben insists that the act of stopping to have one's shoes shined is the 'most banal and ordinary gesture', which in the photograph is 'now charged with the weight of an entire life; that insignificant or even silly moment collects and condenses in itself the meaning of entire existence.'[39] For Benjamin, history is the history of victors, our task is to read against the grain, Agamben's account remains that of the victors: those who can afford to have their shoes shined. Is Agamben seeking to demonstrate that all accounts are those of victors and leave us with the task to read against the grain?

In the second part of his short essay Agamben moves from the photograph in general as a chronicle to the face captured in the photograph. Hence, he insists that the photograph 'demands something of us […] that person, and that face demand their name; they demand not to be forgotten.'[40] Here Agamben explicitly illustrates his claim with a reference to Benjamin's essay 'A Short History of Photography' and Benjamin's account of Hills' photograph of a fishwife which leaves us with 'an unruly desire to know what her name was, the woman who was alive there, who even now is still real and will never consent to be wholly absorbed in *art*'.[41] For Agamben, Benjamin articulates his claim that a demand is placed upon the viewer: 'a demand for the name of that women who was once alive.'[42]

For Agamben, photography demands that we remember the past through photographs for they are chronicles of the past. Moreover, he argues that the face captured in a photograph demands its name to be remembered: 'photography testifies to all those lost names.'[43] However, Agamben offers no further discussion to explain the demand of the face.

In an essay published a year earlier (2004) entitled 'Precarious Life' – an essay written in response to the events following 9/11 and published in a book under the same title – Judith Butler offers an account of media photography which further develops and critiques some of the above themes in Agamben, through Levinas. Butler is seeking to show how Levinas might offer a response that would 're-humanize' debate in a world following 9/11. Moreover she says, Levinas does 'give us a way of thinking about the relationship between representation and humanization'[44] – in other words, a relationship between vision (aesthetics) and ethics. If critical thinking has something to say about the present situation, she says, 'it may well be in the domain of representation where humanization and dehumanization occur ceaselessly.'[45]

In 'Reality and its Shadow' Levinas argues that the realm of images offers a realm of otherness, but it is also the realm of the night and the inhuman, discourse is necessary to connect the realm of the Meanwhile with that of humanity. In his later work Levinas develops an account of the face that maintains some connection to the visual, the face is encountered visually, albeit it is not visible as a face. Levinas's account of the face is complex and somewhat problematical in its references to the Judaic God and the Old Testament. Leaving this aside, it remains difficult, not least because the face is at times presented within perceptual experience, at other times it is the effacement of the face, and in order for the face to operate as a face it must be understood in terms of discourse, the voice not the visual. In Levinas, the visual is always illusory, and yet the most central theme in Levinas, ethics, is encountered through the otherness of the face and its infinite demand on me.

Since 'Precarious Life' aims at an audience beyond the philosophical, Butler offers a somewhat simplified account. The face, she suggests, is a notion introduced by Levinas in order to explain how it is that others place moral demands on us, address moral demands to us: demands that we do not expect and are not free to refuse.[46] Butler is using Levinas's articulation given in a 1986 interview where Levinas offers a simplified summary, which I quote here:

> The approach to the face is the most basic mode of responsibility […]. The face is not in front of me, but above me; it is the other before death, looking through and exposing death. […] [T]he face is the other who asks me not to let him die alone, as if to do so were to become an accomplice in his death. Thus the face says to me: you shall not kill. […] My ethical relation of love for the other stems from the face that the self cannot survive by itself alone, cannot find meaning within its own being-in-the-world […] [T]o expose myself to the vulnerability of the face is to put my ontological right to existence into question. In ethics, the other's right to exist has primacy over my own, a primacy epitomized by the ethical edict; you shall not kill, you shall not jeopardize the life of the other.[47]

Butler is careful to explain that whilst the face does not speak, nevertheless it imposes commandments. Moreover, for Levinas, the face is not exclusively a human face, nor does it describe the face as seen, that is the front view. The face may 'show' itself with the human back, and this face is said to cry, sob, scream, as if it were a mouth capable

of vocalization and words. Moreover, for Levinas, the face of the other comes to me from the outside, it interrupts me, it calls out to me, in an address I do not will and to which I am held hostage. As Butler quotes Levinas, 'to be in relation with the other face to face is to be unable to kill. It is also the situation of discourse.'[48] Discourse, in Levinas is not an equal exchange through language but an address I did not invite and to which I am hostage and called to respond.

Butler utilizes Levinas's account of the face as ethics, however, her distinction between humanization and dehumanization is not strictly Levinasian, it is both a development and a critique of Agamben's distinction. In his 1995 publication *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* Agamben develops a distinction between 'bare life' and the life of the political being. The former is the biological minimum required for survival but deprived of any social and political status and thus what counts as human. However, since in Agamben it is not clear how we can move out of this position which divides the human through dehumanization, Butler utilizes Levinas's ethical account of the face, in an attempt to offer a way to overcome the above difficulty.

The distinction between humanization and dehumanization, she says, and the implicit reference here is perhaps to Arendt, Agamben and the philosophical tradition, is based on the assumption that

> those who gain representation, especially self-representation, have a better chance of being humanized, and those who have no chance to represent themselves run a greater risk of being treated as less than human, regarded as less than human, or indeed, not regarded at all.[49]

And yet, Butler points out, within the media, photographs of the face are often used in order to effect dehumanization, it thus seems that 'personification does not always humanize.'[50] Moreover, by focusing on the singularity of the person portrayed, by naming the person portrayed, we can still dehumanize the person portrayed. For Levinas, she argues the face is the condition for humanization, but what precisely is meant by the humanizing face?

The examples of media photographic representations Butler offers are of the way in which media portraits are often marshalled in the service of war. The images that dominate in the media are of the heroes and enemies of the war; Colin Powell, for example, stands for the former, Bin Laden, Saddam Hussein and Yasser Arafat for the latter. However, Butler asks, 'where is loss in that face?' and 'where is the suffering over the war?'. We are offered the face of triumph, the face of terror and the face of evil, but, she asks: 'what scenes of pain and grief [do] these images cover over?'. They are all 'the spoils of war or they are the targets of war.'[51] Butler offers here an unmistakeable reference to Benjamin. However, in Benjamin there is no motivation that compels us to read against the grain. Butler is using Levinas in the hope that his account of ethics might become visible in our actions.

Media representations, Butler argues, do not offer personification and thus humanizing the person, something else is happening instead:

> We personify the evil or military triumph through a face that is
> supposed to be, to capture, to contain the very idea for which it stands.
> In which case, we cannot hear the face through the face. The face here
> masks the sounds of human suffering and the proximity we might have
> to the precariousness of life itself.[52]

Butler's argument is that no matter how many photographs we collect of images that
convey the horror and suffering of the war, this in itself will not be enough. Reality is
not conveyed, she argues, 'by what is represented within the image, but through the
challenge to representation that reality delivers.'[53] The Levinasian face is not the face
captured in a photograph. Whilst photography can work to bring about the ethics of
the face, it is not through illustrations of faces.

The media's evacuation of the human through the image, she argues, needs to be
understood within the larger scheme that seeks to establish normative approaches to
'what will and will not be human, what will be a liveable life, what will be a grievable
death.'[54] The media operates on the one hand by providing no images, no names, no
narratives, so that there never was a life or death, there is no one to grieve and mourn,
or on the other, by personifying the portrayed as evil and thus inhuman.

Though Butler is utilizing Levinas's account of the ethics of the face, she does not leave
us with the Levinasian ethical demand alone. Butler thus concludes by saying:

> the task on hand is to establish modes of public seeing and hearing that
> might well respond to the cry of the human within the sphere of
> appearance, a sphere in which the trace of the cry has become
> hyperbolically inflated to rationalize a gluttonous nationalism, or fully
> obliterated where both alternatives turn out to be the same. We might
> consider this as one of the philosophical and representational
> implications of war, because politics – and power – work in part
> through regulating what can appear, what can be heard.[55]

It is because we are operating within a system that regulates what can be seen, not
merely what is represented but what might be made visible and what might not, that
the Levinasian face does not often appear in media photographs, though sought to be
achieved in some works of art including photographs.

Since the task proposed by Butler, following Levinas, is an endless task, which might
only be accomplished momentarily, Butler closes the essay with an example of an event
in which suffering can yield an experience of humility and vulnerability. Such
experiences, Butler suggests can become

> resources, if we do not 'resolve' them too quickly; they can move us beyond
> and against the vocation of the paranoid victim who regenerates infinitely
> the justification for war. […] In the Vietnam War, it was the pictures of the
> children burning and dying from napalm that brought the US public to a
> sense of shock, outrage, remorse, and grief. […] [T]hey disrupted the visual
> field and the entire sense of public identity that was built upon that field.[56]

Butler suggests that these images offered something beyond themselves, something signalling the precariousness of life and as such, she argues, something like the Levinasian ethics of the face motivated and mobilized US citizens to campaign against the war. It is often suggested that Hung Cong (Nick) Ut 1972 photograph *Accidental Napalm Attack* was the seminal image from the Vietnam War where the intensity of suffering children emphasized by the expression of pain on the face and the open mouths screaming mobilized the American public to stop the war. However, whilst few might contest the role of such photographic images in mobilizing American public opinion, it remains unclear whether we can argue that this was an instant where Levinasian ethics can be 'seen' to be in action.

I applaud Butler for her courage in this essay and her attempt to deal with these very difficult and urgent problems facing us all today. Moreover, she does so through an attempt to deal philosophically with the visual images – mostly photographs – accompanying and promoting it. However, whilst I agree with most of her comments and general argument, her attempt to do so through Levinas is problematic. For Levinas, the face of the other is infinitely demanding, it calls my being into question at every encounter. As such it is an unfulfillable demand, it is a traumatic demand, to use Critchley's articulation. Contemporary politics operate in the other direction, hence Levinas's ethics can not lead to political actions, though I would hope might play a role in occasionally interrupting it. Nevertheless, I think Butler is right and there are aspects in Levinas that can bring ethics closer to politics, but these aspects need highlighting further. I am suggesting a brief detour through Lacan's to illustrate my point and reconnect ethics, vision and photography to Lacan and Levinas.

In his 1964 Seminar, Lacan argues against Husserl and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology where a distinction is placed between the visible and the invisible. Lacan suggests that in the scopic field there is a split between the eye and the gaze. Whilst I cannot see the gaze, I become an object to the gaze, for we are, Lacan says, beings 'who are looked at, in the spectacle of the world.'[57] Like Lacan, Levinas also insists that in the encounter of the face 'the subject discovers itself as an object, in the accusative case, interlocuted by the demand of the other.'[58] The demand of the gaze and the demand of the face are both fundamentally infinite and unfulfillable.

For Lacan, 'any picture is a trap for the gaze. In any picture, it is precisely in seeking the gaze in each of its points that you will see it disappear.'[59] The same could be said of Levinas's account of the encounter with the face, where he says, 'I do not master it, rather it […] grasps me, solicits me at every moment.'[60] Lacan focuses on the skull in Holbein's painting the *Ambassadors* as an example of the gaze, but perhaps Benjamin's example in his 'Short History of Photography' might be more helpful here. Benjamin tells us that early viewers of daguerreotypes found it difficult to watch and had to turn their heads away, 'we […] believed that the little tiny faces in the picture could see us.'[61] Perhaps we have got so used to photographs we have lost the sensitivity of feeling that we could be watched by those portrayed, or more accurately by what the photograph captures, which may not necessarily be a human face, but time itself? Might this loss have implications for our ethical conduct today?

Notes

[1] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* [1973], trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p.106.

[2] Plato, *Timaeus*, 47b, trans. Desmond Lee (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p.65.

[3] Plato, *Timaeus*, 47c, p.65.

[4] Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function', [1966], trans. Alan Sheridan (New York and London: Norton & Company, 1977), p.6.

[5] Emmanual Levinas, 'Reality and its Shadow' [1948], in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. and trans. Seán Hand (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell,1989), pp.129–43 (p.132).

[6] Emmanual Levinas, 'Reality and its Shadow', p.137.

[7] Emmanual Levinas, 'Reality and its Shadow', p.136.

[8] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p.47.

[9] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p.71.

[10] Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (London: Routledge, 1992), p.76.

[11] Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960*, p.292.

[12] Emmanual Levinas, 'Reality and its Shadow', p.143.

[13] Emmanual Levinas, 'Reality and its Shadow', p.132.

[14] Emmanual Levinas, 'Reality and its Shadow', p.134.

[15] Emmanual Levinas, 'Reality and its Shadow', p.132.

[16] Emmanual Levinas, 'Reality and its Shadow', p.137.

[17] Emmanual Levinas, 'Reality and its Shadow', p.138.

[18] Emmanual Levinas, 'Reality and its Shadow', p.141.

[19] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* [1980], trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000), p.5, p.6.

[20] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.4.

[21] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.4.

[22] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.9.

[23] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp.19–20.

[24] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.3.

[25] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.115.

[26] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.115.

[27] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.118.

[28] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.118.

[29] Giorgio Agamben, 'Judgement Day', trans. Jeff Fort, in *Profanations* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), pp.23–28 (p. 23).

[30] Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' [1940], trans. Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schoken Books, 1968), pp.253–64 (p. 255).

[31] Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', p.256.

[32] Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', p.256.

[33] Giorgio Agamben, 'Judgement Day', p.25.

[34] Giorgio Agamben, 'Judgement Day', p.25.

[35] Giorgio Agamben, 'Judgement Day', p.25.

[36] The daguerreotype is widely reproduced. See Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History* (London: Lawrence King, 2002).

[37] Giorgio Agamben, 'Judgement Day', p.24.

[38] Giorgio Agamben, 'Judgement Day', p.24.

[39] Giorgio Agamben, 'Judgement Day', p.24.

[40] Giorgio Agamben, 'Judgement Day', p.25.

[41] Walter Benjamin, 'Short History of Photography', trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *One-Way Street, and Other Writings* (London: NLB, 1979), pp.240–57 (p. 242).

[42] Giorgio Agamben, 'Judgement Day', p.26.

[43] Giorgio Agamben, 'Judgement Day', p.27.

[44] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), p.140.

[45] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, p.140.

[46] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, p.131.

[47] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, pp.131–32.

[48] Emmanual Levinas, quoted in Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, p.138.

[49] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, p.140.

[50] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, p.141.

[51] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, p.143.

[52] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, p.145.

[53] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, p.146.

[54] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, p.146.

[55] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, p.147.

[56] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, p.150.

[57] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p.75.

[58] Simon Crichley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007), p.57.

[59] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p.89.

[60] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p.96.

[61] Walter Benjamin, *'Short History of Photography'*, p.245.

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